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AUTHOR	Stephens, E. Robert; Collins, Tim; Stern, Joyce; Sanders, John R.
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ABSTRACT

This analysis is organized by decades, 1950s-1990s. In each decade, a context is presented for summarizing general information on broad education events that also affected rural areas and schools. Next, policies are outlined that were directed at or had a significant impact on rural education at the federal and then the state level. State-level policies with national significance are included. Research that specifically focused on rural education is also described. Finally, other critical developments that significantly affected rural education in that decade are listed. Each milestone is followed by a brief statement of rationale for inclusion. Those interested in rural schools have much to celebrate when they review the milestones of the past 50 years, including the virtual demise of mandated school district reorganization; the development of many state policy strategies to address issues of funding adequacy and equity, as well as quality educational programs; the growing body of additive, policy-relevant research; the increasing professionalization of rural policymakers, educators, and researchers; the growth of rural special interest groups at the national and state levels; the resurgence of local citizens seeking to play an active role in their schools; and the slow, inexorable establishment of precedence favorable to rural schools in federal laws and policy. The continuing struggle of rural residents to provide a quality education for their children, despite obstacles, has helped make these milestones possible. (Contains 21 references.) (TD)

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Milestones in Rural Education, 1950 - 2000.
A SERVE Special Report

E. Robert Stephens
Tim Collins
Joyce Stern
John R. Sanders

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A SERVE Special Report

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Milestones in Rural Education 1950–2000

A 2001 SERVE Special Report

Over the past 50 years, rural education has seen numerous *milestones*—benchmarks signaling a significant change in research perspective or policy direction.

The ever-changing landscape of school reform is closely linked to both the economy and politics. Kirst (1984) correctly noted educational cycles are related to national power shifts. Curiously, each of the shifts in this century—in the 1920s, the 1950s, and the 1980s—accompanied rural decline spurred by changing world markets and the mechanization of natural-resource-based industries, such as farming, mining, and logging (cf. Collins, 1995). These changes had tremendous impacts on rural schools and communities.

In a related approach to school change, Karier (1973) discussed different phases of the social efficiency movement in the 1920s and 1950s, whereby education nationwide became more standardized. Education was increasingly linked to promoting national security and economic prosperity and to ameliorating social ills (Grissom, 1973). Later in the 1980s, education reforms were driven by similar expectations (cf. Collins, 1995).

A study of rural schools and communities during the period would, at first glance, indicate a decline in local school control along with the political and economic power of rural areas. However, in the past two decades, a widespread and vigorous movement has emerged that is dedicated to improving rural schools and shoring up declining communities (Collins, forthcoming).

The education cycles of reform over the past 50 years suggest a broad landscape for identifying significant events in rural education. The milestones of rural education mark efforts to deal with the economic and social tensions faced by rural schools and communities and are reflective of complex concerns over how best to educate children.

These concerns give rise to questions and issues that rural communities and schools have grappled with over the past half-century and into the present. These questions include:

- How do we prepare to be good citizens and good workers and to have fulfilling lives?
- How should rural schools help prepare children for adulthood?
- How much control should rural communities have over their schools?
- What is the role of state and national standards in rural community schools?
- How do rural schools balance local, state, and national interests that may not be in harmony with one another?
- How do rural communities keep their schools open in the face of declining economic fortunes?

By understanding the economic, social, and political context of the education milestones outlined below, we can begin to understand the context of these important questions and perhaps begin to draw more informed answers.

What are the Milestones?

A *milestone*, as used within these pages, is an important event in the last half-century of the history of rural education. As used in the performance-measurement literature, *milestones* are events that would likely be viewed by most observers as representing progress toward achieving a commonly held goal. This article examines major milestones: events that are judged to be primary among important events in the last half-century of rural education, turning points that changed the course of rural education in this century in fundamental ways.

Any analysis of milestones is, of course, complicated by the tremendous diversity of rural communities across the U.S.

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Associated with the School of Education, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Written for SERVE by

E. Robert Stephens,
Institute Director for Regional Rural Studies in Education

Tim Collins,
Extension Agent for Economic and Community Development

Joyce Stern,
Consultant to SERVE

John R. Sanders,
Executive Director, SERVE

Edited by

Donna Nalley,
Director of Publications, SERVE

Designed by

Jeremy McClellan,
Graphic Designer, SERVE

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Yet, the rural education literature, reviewed against a backdrop of global and national events, suggests there were indeed clear markers that demonstrate how rural education in this country changed in fundamental ways. These milestones may be viewed variously as representing progress toward achievement of a commonly held goal or value and as efforts or strategies in dealing with socioeconomic change and decline that has affected schools in many rural areas.

This report summarizes major rural education milestones that clearly show rural education at its best, emphasizing the value of place, roots, and community involvement, which contribute mightily to the healthy development of children. In addition, the research identifies the problems of the factory mode of education, which aims at efficiency through "one size fits all," with little consideration for the needs of individual children. It is hoped that understanding historic patterns and the evolving research and policy perspectives on rural schools will help facilitate future positive developments for rural education.

Our analysis is organized by decades. In each decade, a context is presented for summarizing general information on broad education events that also affected rural areas and schools. Next, policies are outlined that were directed at or had a significant impact on rural education at the federal and then the state level. State-level policies with national significance are included. Research that specifically focused on rural education is also described. Finally, other critical developments that significantly affected rural education are listed. Each milestone is followed by a brief statement of rationale for inclusion.

The 1950s

The Context

After World War II, there were numerous education reform efforts. School districts across the country, especially rural ones, were in terrible condition because of low funding, poor facilities, obsolete educational materials, and a teacher shortage (Ravitch, 1983).

The 1950s were notable for the following five reasons:

1. Schools were blamed for failing to serve labor requirements of the industrial economy (Nasaw, 1979).
2. The Cold War, especially the Sputnik launching in 1957, underscored the new link between national strategic and economic interests with education (DeYoung, 1989; Nasaw, 1979). According to Karier (1973), the growth of the military-industrial complex caused a shortage of skilled workers, triggering a new "social efficiency" movement with increased emphasis on schooling to serve manpower needs.
3. There was increased federal influence on education; the axis tilted from state-local district relations to state-federal relations (Ravitch, 1983).
4. The early shaping of modern federal rural development policy hinted at connections that would later be made between the need for education and workforce development.
5. Katznelson and Weir (1988: 121–123) demonstrate how schools were depoliticized and public participation was dampened, as schools became the domain of professional specialists working in the public interest.

Federal Policy

As a result of concern about national preparedness spawned by the Cold War in general and Sputnik in particular, federal involvement in education jumped with passage of the National Defense Education Act in 1958 (Ravitch, 1983). This legislation resulted in enhanced mathematics and science capacities in many rural schools.

State Policies with National Significance

- Widespread state mandates regarding minimum district size led to a radical reduction in one-room schools.
- Efforts in states such as Kentucky to equalize local funding, as well as provide adequate minimum funding, attempted to address rural school funding inequalities.

Research

The American High School Today (1959), authored by Harvard president James Conant, "legitimized" the ongoing state-mandated reorganization of rural schools across the country by arguing that at least 400 students were needed in order to be able to have a comprehensive high school program. The book's assertions were virtually unchallenged, despite problems with the notion of a comprehensive program and issues of local versus state control.

Other Significant Events

- The demise of the community schools movement of the 1940s meant a reshaping of local control (cf. Collins, 1995). Instead, educators leaned toward vocational or "functional" education, inspired by the life adjustment movement (DeYoung, 1989; Ravitch, 1983). Goodman (1949) notes that high schools of the time were still too oriented toward college preparation and did not pay sufficient attention to the needs of most students. Armstrong (1949) argues that vocational education could aid life adjustment for the majority of students and could also allow curriculum adaptations to reflect changing economic conditions. For rural areas, this meant continued school consolidation to expand educational offerings for older students.
- In contrast to the idea that schools should be social service centers meeting needs of individuals and communities, the rising educational excellence movement of the 1950s focused on national needs. For example, the 1958 Rockefeller Brothers Fund Report, *The Pursuit of Excellence*, urged education to address national goals and emphasize both excellence and equality (Ravitch 1983). Emphasis on training students to be workers became more important (DeYoung, 1989, Spring 1985), and schools had political and social objectives (Grissom, 1973).

The 1960s

The Context

In the midst of growing political dissension and social fragmentation spurred by the assassination of President Kennedy and the ongoing war in Southeast Asia, the 1960s became a decade of considerable education reform. While the decade opened with an expanding role of government and tremendous national optimism, at its close, there were visible and vocal challenges to America's social institutions, including its schools. As the 1960s waned, the post-World War II economic expansion and the implementation of the New Deal welfare state were coming to an end. Rural areas had benefited from government activism in new education programs, expanded school funding, and rural development programs. Yet, many problems remained, and there was still the perception that rural schools lagged qualitatively behind their urban and suburban counterparts.

Federal Policies of the 1960s

- The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 marked a major step in federal involvement with the potential for significant impact on rural areas. Title I's formula funds for poor children infused additional support into rural schools nationwide. Provisions of ESEA included creation of the Regional Education Laboratory system, ERIC Clearinghouses (specifically one that was targeted at rural and small schools), and Title X, which was dedicated to rural schools but not fully implemented. Title III encouraged collaboration among schools, leading to the rise of regional education service agencies.
- The emergence of the federal "War on Poverty," accompanied by a more explicit rural development policy, made connections between education and labor force issues. Programs such as the Office of Economic Opportunity's Head Start had significant impact on helping to prepare rural poor children for school.
- Passage of the Vocational Education Act in 1963 offered rural schools the opportunity to set up programs geared toward helping youth develop specific skills that they could later use in the work force.

State Policy with National Significance

Coordination of widespread state efforts at district reorganization that required unified K–12 districts led to the virtual elimination of K–8 districts and one-room schools, as well as massive reduction in the number of rural school districts.

Research

- Barker and Grabe's seminal work *Big School, Small School* (1962) gave birth to the powerful expression "one size does not fit all." Their study of Kansas high schools refuted the theory that larger schools with a rich curriculum, varied extracurricular activities, and good facilities necessarily lead to a uniformly positive educational experience for students.
- The emergence of human capital theory in academic discussions made a clear link between individual prosperity and educational level. The theory offers one explanation for the out-migration of better-educated rural youth who cannot find employment in rural economies limited by low-skill, low-wage jobs (cf. DeYoung, 1989).

Other Significant Events

In the face of rampant urbanization with a concentration of employment opportunities in metropolitan areas, a "back to the land" movement emerged, reflecting a new appreciation for rural areas. Environmental education, designed to foster wise use of natural resources, also encouraged greater appreciation of the land and of smaller communities located in the countryside. The consequent influx of new residents into some rural areas offered possibilities for rural school and community revivals and had a significant impact on schools.

The 1970s

The Context

This decade saw massive changes in the nation's politics and economy, partly in reaction to the turmoil of the 1960s. Dissension was quelled, despite increased suspicion of the federal government, as the country became more conservative.

Coleman (1990) posited that old educational assumptions had been abandoned because of the emergence of various new philosophies of education during the 1960s and 1970s, such as the Montessori method, "open education," and "basic education." Coleman wrote that "these developments suggest an abandonment of the principle of [school attendance] assignment by residence and an expansion of the modes of education supported by public schools." DeYoung (1989) insisted that there was nothing new about either diverse educational philosophies nor educational "crises." Instead, they are part of a continuing process of social change that affects rural schools and communities.

Federal Policies of the 1970s

- Congressional passage of P.L. 94–142 [8] (1975) marked a watershed in that the legislation attempted to ensure that special education students were guaranteed equal educational opportunities. The measure changed special education by increasing funding for new programs and by requiring services for handicapped children. Rural students also benefited significantly. The measure was not fully funded, however, and it mandated unfounded programs that some rural areas could not afford. It also increased the importance of regional educational service agencies. This measure was the forerunner of IDEA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.
- Passage of P.L. 94–482 (1976), Title II, amended the Vocational Education Act of 1963 to, among other things, set up vocational programs in areas with high concentrations of unemployed youth for disadvantaged persons and for bilingual education. This measure enhanced vocational education in rural schools.

State Policy with National Significance

Serrano u. Priest, a 1977 California court decision on school funding equity related to property taxes, triggered reforms in other states. In essence, the ruling stated that California's school funding formula, which was based largely on property taxes, was unconstitutional because poor areas, including many rural school districts, were unable to generate revenue equivalent to rich areas (Serrano v. Priest [20 Cal.3d 25] [L.A. No. 30398. Supreme Court of California. October 4, 1977]). This issue continues to be addressed by jurisdictions nationwide.

Research

- Publication of *Education in Rural America: A Reassessment of Conventional Wisdom* (1977), edited by Jonathon Sher, changed the debate about the importance of a strong education infrastructure in rural America. Sher was perhaps the first researcher in a generation to closely link the health of rural schools to the health of the community, while also focusing interest among researchers on rural education issues.
- Tompkins (1977) noted that slowly increasing state-government aid to rural areas represented a recognition of unequal funding; however, typically the aid only maintained rural districts at subsistence levels. Resistance to an increased state-government role in rural education funding, Tompkins believed, reflected the urban orientation of state policymakers; nor did rural citizens like the results of consolidation, urban schools, and education models.

Other Significant Events

- The Department of Rural Education was dissolved in the National Education Association, leading to the founding of the National Rural Education Association in 1971. The new group included not only teachers, but also state education officials, administrators, and researchers concerned about rural education.
- The 1975 establishment of People United for Rural Education (PURE) in Iowa served as a model for other state rural education advocacy groups.
- The worldwide stagflation of the 1970s affecting rural areas gradually gave way to reduced inflation and an increase in business activity by the end of the decade. In addition, increased economic competition from abroad stimulated businesses with more of a global focus during the 1970s, sowing the seeds for education reform in the late 1980s that demanded world-class students.

The 1980s

The Context

In analyzing education change in the 1970s and the reforms that burgeoned in the 1980s, it is important to remember what DeYoung (1989) called *perceived crises*. Spring (1985) identified certain national problems that led to the renewed demands for reform in the early 1980s after a decade of what he viewed as the relative neglect of America's schools. These problems included:

- Overall high unemployment rates, especially among youth, partly a result of the baby boom;
- A productivity decline and slowing economic growth;
- A decline in domestic capital investment by U.S. industries; and
- A decline in wages because of a labor oversupply.

Spring argued that the U.S. actually became more labor intensive as stagflation, caused in part by rising energy prices and relatively high interest rates, gripped the economy (especially damaging natural-resource-based industries in rural areas, such as the well-publicized farm crisis). The 1980s saw a decline in new workers as a result of the end of the baby boom, so there was a need for increased education to augment labor pool skills.

The 1980s marked the third weaving of social efficiency ideas into the educational fabric since World War I. This time, the specter was foreign competition, characterized by the ability of firms to move capital rapidly and by global labor markets. Rural areas felt the impact of these changes acutely. Now they could no longer tout themselves as sources of low-wage labor because workers could be had far more cheaply overseas. Rural schools felt considerable pressure to improve just as overseas competition was eroding communities (cf. Collins, 1995).

The leaders of the 1980s' education "excellence" movement had specific goals. For the most part, they were aimed at labor needs and economic development (Shor, 1986; Spring, 1985). References about *educational equity*, defined as access to educational opportunities—common in the literature into the 1970s—were muted in the 1980s' national discussions (Spring, 1985). Katznelson and Weir (1989) blamed suburbanization and fragmented economic and racial geography. Spring (1985) concluded that excellence without adequate funding or without support for compensatory education helped the rich—where students are separated according to the income of their parents and divided into leaders of the new technology and workers, according to the needs of the labor market. The new curricula, Spring continued, were designed to prepare students to solve technocratic problems and to serve corporations, not to develop thinking participants in a democratic society. The main thrust of the proposed reforms was to increase academic standards and achievement expectations, along with improved measurement (DeYoung, 1989). Another goal was worker flexibility to deal with a constantly changing economy.

The emergence of "new federalism" during the decade altered federal-state relations and gradually opened the door for renewed community involvement and control of rural schools. It is likely that this was an unintended consequence of federal reformers.

Federal Policies of the 1980s

- The U.S. Department of Education offered the first specific policy commitment to rural education in modern times and to promote cross-laboratory activities.
- The 25% rural set-aside for rural education in the 1988 Regional Education Laboratory (REL) budget helped fund research and programs, promoted cross-lab activities in rural education, and was instrumental in developing a network of rural education researchers and technical assistance providers.
- The 1988 passage of the Star Schools program helped bring technology to rural schools.
- The establishment of Rural Technical Assistance Centers (Chapter 1) in 1988 recognized the problems of rural schools with limited resources in helping special-needs students.
- Designation of a "rural coordinator" in the Department of Education in 1988 was intended to monitor the REL rural initiative and to serve as a significant federal-level advocate for rural education.

State Policies with National Significance

- Establishment in many states of programs to provide rural financial aid helped equalize finding.
- Establishment in many states of strategies to assist rural schools (whole-grade sharing, shared superintendencies) helped increase resources available to schools and districts.
- Numerous lawsuits across the nation aimed at funding equity and quality education programs led to significant reforms that affected rural schools.
- The emergence of site-based councils was a symbol of the return of school governance powers to communities.

Research

- Paul Nachtigal edited *Rural Education: In Search of a Better Way* (1982), a work supported by the Ford Foundation, which synthesized 13 case studies to show the importance of community support for schools. The case studies added significant insights on the condition of rural education.
- Alan DeYoung's 1987 article, "The Status of American Rural Education Research: An Integrated Review and Commentary," pulled together strands of rural education research into a cohesive package, while it also encouraged continued work in the area.

Other Significant Events

- Walter McIntyre and his colleagues at the University of Maine founded the *Journal of Research in Rural Education* in 1982.
- Organizations Concerned about Rural Education (OCRE), reconstituted in 1982, provided a forum for public and nonpublic organizations to advocate for rural education at a national level.
- NREA Research Forum, established in 1984, offered a place for rural researchers to share their work with practitioners.
- The American Education Research Association's rural special interest group, formed in 1985, offered a place for rural education researchers and other education research specialties to disseminate their work.
- NREA designated a part-time executive director to manage its affairs and advocate for rural schools.

These developments represented the further professionalization and legitimization of rural education research and practice, while helping to create a national voice for rural education.

The 1990s

The Context

The 1990s saw continuing energy dedicated to reforming schools nationwide. Global competition remained a watchword during the decade, as reform efforts became more focused on low-performing schools with the emergence of comprehensive reform programs. The long economic expansion offered many rural areas increased resources to carry out reforms. A "rural turnaround" brought new residents who sparked new life into many rural communities with easy access to urban areas and suburbs. In addition, what appears to be a bona fide rural schools movement emerged.

Federal Policies of the 1990s

- The National Science Foundation's Rural Systemic Initiative in 1994 represented an important precedent in federal efforts toward large-scale school improvement specifically aimed at rural schools.
- The passage of Comprehensive School Reform legislation suggested a major philosophical shift in policy aimed at improving conditions in high-poverty, low-performing schools. The program was built on the premise that reforms across the whole school improve the climate for learning and help poor students' learning in rural areas.
- Federal support for e-mail and the World Wide Web (for example, the E-rate legislation) gave rural schools considerable access to educational resources.
- Discussions about national standards and school facilities highlighted rural schools' problems and prospects.

State Policies with National Significance

- There was a continuation of school inequality lawsuits aimed at improving conditions for children in rural schools.
- A number of states established programs to address the teacher shortage in some rural areas. These programs included helping adults who were interested in making a career change and encouraging students to take up teaching as adults.

Research

- *The Condition of Rural Education*, edited by Joyce Stern for the Department of Education, was published in 1994. Prepared with input by the Regional Education Laboratories, it was the first-ever national data-based report on rural schooling and gave a high level of legitimacy to support for rural education needs in federal policy circles.
- The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) released its School Locale Code in 1993, which identified the location of America's public schools by population density. Elder merged the locality code with the Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service's county typology in 1993. Both helped define and locate rural schools, but a universal definition has yet to be agreed upon.

- Craig Howley's work on student achievement in rural schools raised serious challenges to the conventional view that rural academic achievement was inferior to that in urban and suburban schools.

Other Significant Events

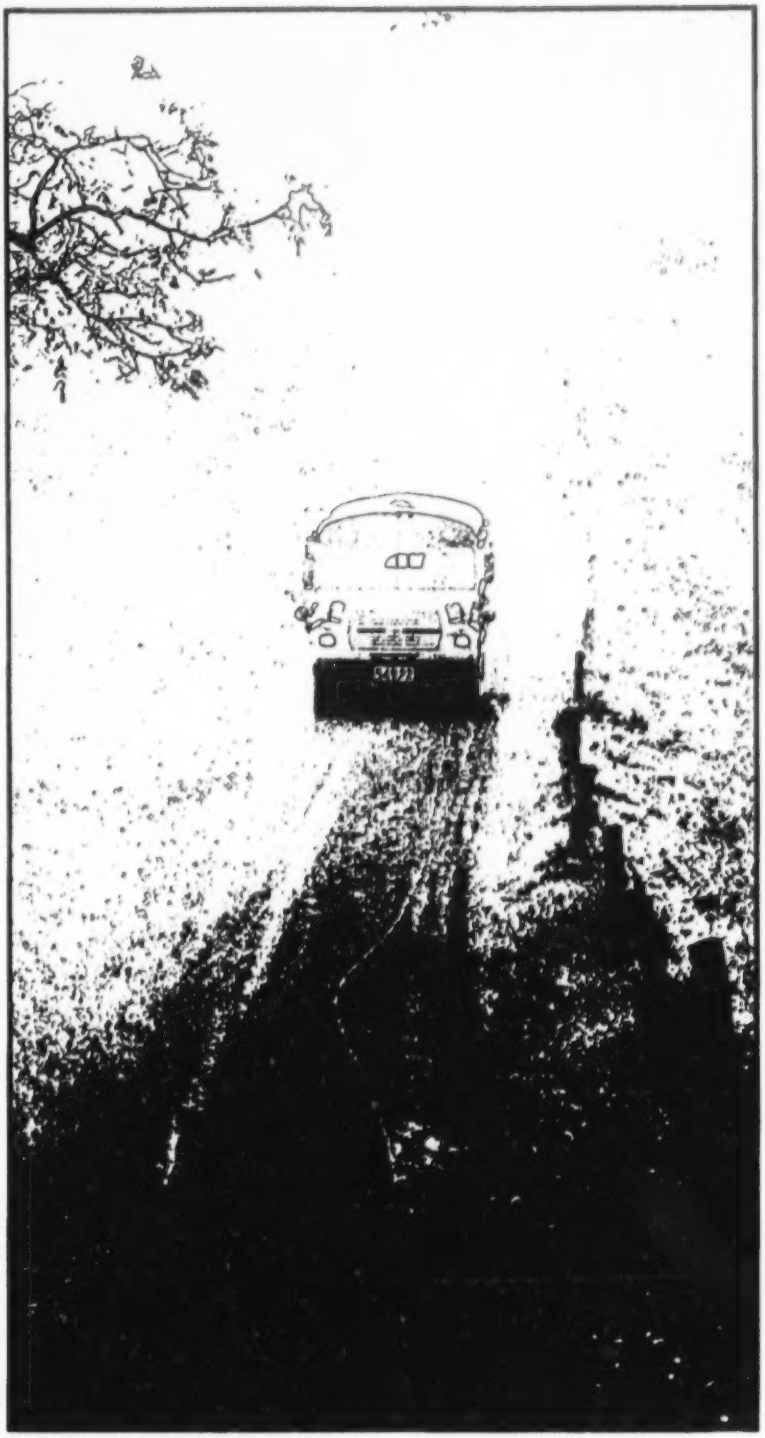
The funding of the Annenberg Rural Challenge (later, the Rural School and Community Trust) helped communities set up quality programs in more than 700 rural schools across the country. The emphasis on local school control and a curriculum of "place" was a manifestation of renewed vigor in many rural settings in response to the devolution of federal and state powers to communities. The resources of the Rural Trust offered a widespread, well-funded, and well-publicized voice for rural education.

Concluding Observations

Those interested in rural schools have much to celebrate when they review the milestones of the past 50 years, including:

- The virtual demise of mandated school district reorganization—a tremendous threat for many years
- The development in many states of state policy strategies to address issues of funding adequacy and equity, as well as quality educational programs
- The growing body of additive, policy-relevant research
- The increasing professionalization of rural policymakers, educators, and researchers
- The growth of rural special interest groups at the national and state levels
- The resurgence of local citizens seeking to play an active role in their schools
- The slow, inexorable establishment of precedence favorable to rural schools in federal laws and policy

Of course, there also have been disappointments. Many of these, however, are the result of factors outside the control of rural residents. The continuing struggle of rural residents to provide a quality education to their children, despite these obstacles, has helped make these milestones possible.



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